

Krill fishing a sticking point in CCAMLR refusal to approve marine protected areas

By Mark Godfrey

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The refusal of the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) to agree on new marine protected areas around Antarctica at its recent meeting was predictable, according to an expert on the krill-fishing sector, who sees jockeying for krill stocks in the Southern Ocean as a proxy in a wider geopolitical competition.

Made up of 25 states plus the European Union, the members of CCAMLR have competing long-term strategies to exploit Antarctica's energy resources as well as its territory for faster maritime travel at a time of warming oceans, according to Dimitri Sclabos, head of Chile-based krill oil consultancy Tharos, based in Chile (a CCAMLR member-state).

The 26 members of the CCAMLR failed to come to agreement on new MPAs – a goal originally proposed in 2002 - at the recent (online) annual meeting of the body, which also heard from New Zealand of a Russian trawler operating illegally in Antarctic.

Last year, Norway accounted for 250,000 tons of the krill catch reported to CCAMLR, well ahead of second-placed China at 51,000 tons. China and Russia have both told the CCAMLR they want to retain fishing rights in any new MPAs.

"The krill fishery is, in my opinion, a glass that mirrors large players' other long-term intentions ... The real game will start in the coming years, when the Antarctic Treaty opens for modifications, around 2050," Sclabos told SeafoodSource.

The Antarctic Treaty was signed to ensure "in the interests of all mankind that Antarctica shall continue forever to be used exclusively for peaceful purposes and shall not become the scene or object of international discord."

Sclabos is opposed to further expansion of MPAs in krill-fishing grounds as in that scenario “the entire krill fishery collapses, and hundreds of millions of revenues lost. Even with the little 7.5 percent of the ocean currently protected by MPAs, this “tiny” space takes away more than 80 percent of the current krill fishery.”

“Nor am I downplaying the importance of a good, straightforward, and necessary control of the krill fishery, which by the way is considered one, if not the best, fishery conservation model that exists. Also the importance to limit tourism and other harmful activities,” Sclabos said.

Sclabos foresees a situation where quotas are introduced for stakeholders.

“In my opinion, this is a hidden driver incumbents have, which is to limit the fishery [with] them left inside.... and if the race ends, and quotas come to play, regulators may look at past fishing effort history to allocate such quotas,” he said. “Hence, the clock is ticking to gain as much ‘fishing history’ as possible.”

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